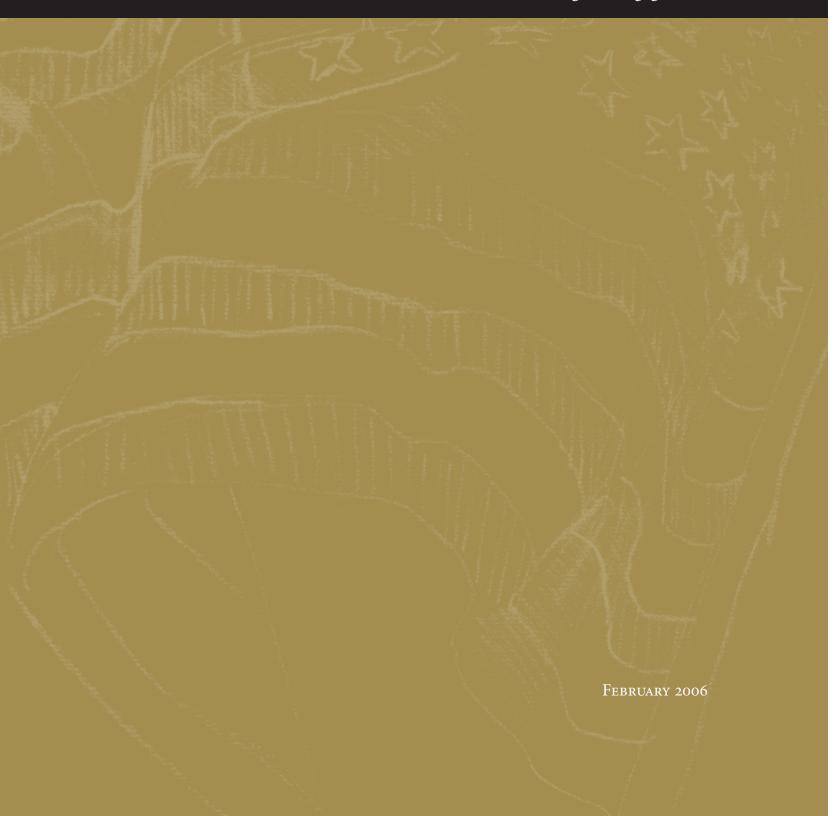# HIGHER EDUCATION:
Civic Mission & Civic Effects

A Report by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching
and CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement)

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Consensus on the Civic Mission

Participants agreed that colleges and universities have a civic mission, which includes being good institutional citizens that serve their communities in multiple ways; providing forums for free democratic dialogue; conducting research on democracy, civil society, and civic development; and educating their own students to be effective and responsible citizens. Most of the meeting was concerned with the last role: civic education at the college level.

Historical Background

In the nineteenth century, American colleges explicitly taught civics and morality and expected their students to incur moral obligations. Between 1880 and 1945, however, American universities participated in a broader cultural movement. This movement sought to replace communal obligations with free, individual choices guided by critical rationality and expertise. During that period, voting became a private activity (thanks to the secret ballot) and political parties were weakened. School districts were dramatically consolidated, reducing opportunities for citizens to serve on local school boards but expanding the power of experts. Likewise, the "modernist" university moved away from explicit moral education.[1] Instead, it embraced choice, individualism, critical distance, and scientific rationality. Departments won administrative autonomy and enhanced academic freedom and began to emphasize scientific research. Political science narrowed its attention to national and international affairs, even though citizens were still most likely to engage at the local level.

The motivation for these changes was civic, reflecting a belief in the democratic and social value of science, expertise, rationality, and centralization. Citizens and leaders were expected to choose among policy options based on evidence. However, scholars found that it was difficult to change society through research, and many decided that this was not their job. Autonomous, research-oriented disciplines became institutionalized and inward-looking, placing a high priority on the training of new scholars. The civic purpose of the modernist university was forgotten.

Between 1945 and 1960, relatively little academic discussion or research was explicitly concerned with citizenship. The modernist project originally had a civic purpose, but it submerged the topic of citizenship, which was seen as normative and unscientific.

In the 1960s, critics begin to attack the university as a bureaucratic shell without a civic or other normative mission. Since then, there has been much civic experimentation on campuses. Student protests led to curricular innovations, including programs like Berkeley's Democratic Education at California

(DeCal) initiative, which allows students to design their own courses on social and civic themes. Service-learning (the intentional combination of community-service with academic work) played a central role in reviving attention to the civic mission of colleges and universities. Campus Compact's *Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Research Universities* (1999) marked an important moment of maturation. The book *Educating Citizens* (2003) described excellent practices at numerous institutions.[2] There has also been a new wave of research on civic participation and the necessary identities, skills, dispositions, and knowledge of responsible and effective citizens. Some of this research has consciously encouraged considering multiple dimensions of civic engagement and has placed U.S. students into an international perspective.[3]

There is evidence, however, that declarations are not always translated into practice. Incentives push college presidents to emphasize fundraising and rankings; professors (especially at research universities) are rewarded for publications and academic honors rather than service or dedication to a civic mission; students are torn between idealism and the perceived imperatives of training for occupations and professions. There is evidence that the civic performance of higher education fails to meet students' pre-matriculation expectations or their readiness to be engaged—especially for the increasing numbers of students who attend college at a later age and part-time.

The same incentive effects obtain for individual disciplines. For example, over the past decade, political science has made strides toward acknowledging its historical civic mission (witness the recently established standing committee on civic education and the landmark report, *Democracy at Risk*[4]). While there has been more research on civic education and engagement, the evidence suggests that progress in the area of pedagogical practice has been slow. As at the high school level, introductory American government courses in college tend to emphasize academic/disciplinary perspectives rather than civic concerns, and relatively few professors have adopted the teaching strategies that tend to enhance civic engagement.

What Constitutes Civic Engagement

The terms "citizenship" and "civic engagement" can be used in exclusive ways. For example, citizenship can mean a legal status conferred on some and withheld from others. However, for the purpose of this document, "citizenship" means participation in political or community affairs, regardless of the participant's legal status.

During the last fifteen years, such participation has been defined and measured in increasingly broad ways. An early evaluation of a service-learning program used only one outcome variable:

voter registration. Other early assessments asked whether students planned to volunteer in the community as adults; an affirmative answer constituted success. Since then, researchers have recognized many other dimensions of civic development, including attitudes and values, identities, habits, skills and knowledge, and many forms of behavior in relation to politics, civil society, and markets. *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* report by Scott Keeter et al. (CIRCLE, 2002) identified 19 behaviors that were "indicators of civic engagement," ranging from voting and volunteering to wearing buttons and political consumerism (purchasing or boycotting products because of an ideological commitment). The Carnegie Foundation's ongoing Political Engagement Project (PEP) uses a similar diversity of measures.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, most political scientists emphasized election-related activities when they studied political participation. However, during the Vietnam era, scholars began to attend to a broader range of activities, including protests, boycotts, and membership in social movements. Since then, Americans have embraced even more forms of political participation, such as making purchases or investment decisions to support social or political causes, giving money to think tanks, using "affinity" credit cards, communicating via blogs, and wearing clothing with political messages —to mention just a few examples. Participants agreed that it is important to teach about and to study (although not necessarily to endorse) the full range of participatory acts. Unless we investigate new forms of political engagement that are particularly popular among youth, we may overlook how "political" young people are.

The quantity, quality, and equality of civic participation are all important, but they do not necessarily move in the same direction. A reform can increase the number of people involved, for example, while undermining the quality or equality of participation. Furthermore, various conceptions of "good citizenship" sometimes conflict. A detached, critical, informed voter is different from someone who is deeply enmeshed in a community. All young people should be prepared to select and exercise forms of civic engagement that are appropriate to their own circumstances.

Major Trends over Time

Surveys by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute and other data show that:

♦ There has been a substantial increase in self-described rates of volunteering, up to 80 percent among incoming college students in recent years.

♦ Students' commitment to racial understanding and environmental responsibility rose after 1985 and peaked in the early 1990s, but appears to have declined subsequently.

♦ Interest in and discussion of politics plummeted after the 1960s and then rose after 2000. The resurgence began before Sept. 11, 2001. The level is still low compared to the 1960s. In interviews, students tend to say that politics is not "relevant" to them.

The Civic Effects of College Attendance: Empirical Evidence

There are strong correlations between years spent in school and college and participation in politics and civil society.[5] However, there is some evidence that the relationship between time spent in college and civic engagement is not as strong or straightforward as it used to be.[6] Besides, this correlation does not by itself prove that colleges and universities enhance students' civic skills, knowledge, and commitments and make them more likely to participate. There are several other plausible explanations, including the following:

1. Perhaps adolescents who are already disposed to civic and political participation are more likely than disengaged students to attend and complete college. In that case, college degrees are proxies for civic characteristics that individuals possess *before* they matriculate. Indeed, studies find that people are already stratified before they finish high school. Those who later go to college have more interest, efficacy, sophistication, and knowledge.[7] Furthermore, differences among colleges (such as their size, type, and mission) do not seem to have consistent influences on civic outcomes. This finding suggests that institutions are not educating students for citizenship as much as they are selecting applicants who already have characteristics such as interest in civic participation or political issues. However, most existing research has used easily available data on institutions; research using other variables (such as tenure policies and other incentives for faculty, the values and priorities of campus leaders, and the availability of civic opportunities on a given campus) might reveal positive effects.

2. Perhaps, compared to citizens with less education, those who are educationally more successful have more social status and resources. Therefore, major institutions are more likely to recruit them and promote their interests; and as a result, these people are more likely to participate. The strongest evidence for this hypothesis is the following combination of facts: the most educated people are always the most civically engaged, mean levels of education have substantially increased since 1900, yet levels of participation are flat.[8] This makes sense if years of education are proxies for social status.

3. Perhaps colleges attract young people who are civically engaged, and they learn civic skills and dispositions from one another. Such "peer effects" show up strongly in several studies and could help explain the correlation between college attendance and civic engagement.[9] Peer effects can be positive when a civically engaged student body shares and reinforces skills and attitudes favorable to engagement. Peer effects can also be negative when disengaged students congregate together.

The available data make it difficult to test these hypotheses with great precision. However, most participants believe that colleges can at least reinforce the civic characteristics that their incoming students bring with them, thereby adding civic value to students' education. Support for this judgment comes from studies that find certain pedagogies effective (see below). These pedagogies are employed by some faculty at many colleges and universities, although numerous students do not experience them. Their beneficial effects could be concealed by large social trends, including a general decline in some forms of participation among adults. In turn, aggregate declines in civic participation may be caused by factors unrelated to education.

Convergent Evidence on Pedagogy

In general, learning and development require encounters with challenging ideas and people and active engagement with those challenges in a supportive environment. Education requires real-world activities and social interaction as well as discipline-based instruction. Learning occurs in many venues and from many sources.

These general principles are consistent with studies and longitudinal data that find lasting positive effects from service-learning, student government, religious participation, groups that explore diversity, and other experiential civic learning. Prompting students to reflect on their experience appears to be an important component.

The Carnegie Foundation's Political Engagement Project is examining courses and programs that use various forms of experiential civic education at the college level, including service-learning, internships, semesters in Washington, visiting speakers, simulations, collaborative social research projects, and living/learning communities. The preliminary findings, based on pre- and post interviews and surveys, show positive results from the 21 programs studied, with a particularly strong positive influence on students who enter the programs with a low level of political interest.[10] Other research shows that diversity classes and discussions also influence students' attitudes and behavior. Such programs have the potential to make an important contribution to civic education at the college level.[11]

In addition to the approaches used in particular classes, departments, and programs, there are thought to be important effects from overall campus climate, the heterogeneity of the student body, institutional leadership, and the array of civic opportunities both on campus and in the surrounding community. Nevertheless, few colleges and universities today have thought through an overall framework for civic and political education that is comprehensive, coherent, conceptually clear, and developmentally appropriate.

Conditional Effects

Little research disaggregates the effects of college attendance—or of particular programs, approaches, and pedagogies—on different demographic groups of students. However, existing evidence suggests that effects vary. For example, data from the National Civic Engagement Survey suggest that men may gain political voice in college, but that women may not.[12] The National Survey of Student Engagement (2004) found that "students at historically Black colleges and universities are far more likely to participate in a course linked to a community project and report gaining more in personal, social and ethical development."[13]

Two Models of Civic Development

It is common in the literature on civic development to assume that students can be motivated, given incentives, or compelled to perform service. Their prior dispositions, along with policies concerning service or service-learning, determine their odds of participating. In the course of service, they may develop skills, dispositions, and knowledge that increase their chances of future participation.

An alternative model has been advanced in the work of James Youniss and colleagues and received some support from participants at the conference. In this model, motivation comes after membership and participation, not before. A community has institutions and groups that address social issues. They may recruit young people, including some who do not have favorable dispositions prior to being recruited. In the course of participation, these young people incur obligations, obtain fulfillment, and develop relationships that affect their identities. They become more likely to participate in the future.[14]

To the extent that the latter model applies, it suggests that much more attention should be directed to organizations and groups and the ways that they recruit (or ignore) young people as participants. Thinking about community factors can also prompt new ideas for civic interventions. For instance, if there are several colleges in a community, and each has a relatively homogeneous student body, then their students can be encouraged to debate or collaborate. Special attention should be given to what attracts part-time or non-traditional students to participate.

Civic Development as a Public and a Private Good

Participants agreed that civic identities, skills, dispositions, and knowledge are *public goods* because they strengthen a democratic society and promote social justice. Civic skills and behaviors may also be *private goods* because:

1. the same skills that are useful for civic participation (consensus-building, working with diverse people, addressing common problems) are also increasingly valuable in the 21st-century workplace;[15]

2. students who engage in their communities while they attend school and college may be more likely to achieve educational success;[16] and

3. civic participation arises from human relationships and obligations that can be fulfilling in an intrinsic sense.

The following dilemma surfaced frequently during the conference. On one hand, if individual colleges and universities devote resources to civic education, they may be less able to attract students whose priority is maximizing their own human capital to compete in a global economy. Nor will these institutions necessarily ascend in rankings of prestige that depend on their ability to attract top students and to generate peer-reviewed research. Many administrators and faculty members acknowledge that their institutions have a mission to develop good citizens, but they do not want to accept that responsibility along with other priorities and demands.

On the other hand, if colleges and universities provide service-learning opportunities and other forms of civic education with a focus on their *private* benefits for students, they may not achieve positive civic outcomes. Convergent research from numerous studies shows that achieving civic outcomes requires intentionality on the part of those who teach and their institutions.

Structure and Incentives

Since civic learning has public benefits and may compete with other, more private goods, it is crucial to address the institutional structures and incentives that either promote or discourage civic education at the college level. These structures may include the availability of relevant courses and student programs; criteria for tenure and promotion; systems for accrediting, evaluating, and rating institutions; and the availability of funding for particular kinds of teaching, research, and service.

Agenda for Future Research

While there is convergent evidence about the principles of effective civic education at the classroom or program level, much needs to be learned about the broader topic of college students' civic development. We need new forms of high-quality research, some of which should place colleges and universities in context. It is also important that research be designed and interpreted in ways that make it useful to those who influence university policies and relevant to professional organizations.

The following priorities for future research were identified during the conference. Some of these aims could be achieved by secondary analysis of existing data sets; others would require new data collection. Participants believe that researchers should strive to:

improve and expand the measures used in research

♦ focus on relevant characteristics of institutions: not just size, type, mission—for which data are easily available—but also campus culture; policies (such as promotion and tenure criteria, allocation of the faculty to first-year courses, campus work-study allocations, and financial-aid policies); institutional leadership at all levels from the department to the university as a whole; and the array of civic engagement opportunities provided across each campus and community for full- and part-time students and for students in different fields of study.

♦ broaden and improve existing measures of civic engagement (without dropping older measures that are useful for measuring trends).

♦ conduct research on community colleges as well as four-year institutions.

♦ measure civic outcomes along with other potential benefits of education—such as academic success, marketable skills, life-satisfaction, and fulfilling social relationships—to learn more about how these outcomes interrelate.

disaggregate factors that are sometimes conflated

♦ disaggregate research on institutions of higher education by looking at different types of institution and multiple venues *within* colleges and universities.

♦ disaggregate outcomes by level of analysis (individual, organization, university-wide culture, surrounding communities, and other external contexts).

♦ disaggregate data by gender, race and ethnicity, immigrant status, family socio-economic status, ideology, religion, and region.

♦ disaggregate "civic engagement" by form (e.g., volunteering, voting, protest), by political versus non-political purpose, by location and venue, by formal or informal organization, by level or intensity of participation, and by motivation (e.g. concern about an issue, personal enhancement).

♦ disaggregate innovations that require changes in university policy from those that can be accomplished by a small group of faculty or students.

strengthen research designs

♦ employ comparative, experimental, and longitudinal designs. Longitudinal or panel studies are especially important in this field, because we are concerned about the lasting effects of youth experiences. Randomized experiments are powerful methods for identifying causality.

♦ conduct comparative studies on multiple campuses.

♦ look for indirect as well as direct effects from programs and policies.

♦ look at the effects of programs on different groups of students or in different college and university contexts using hierarchical linear modeling.

♦ when appropriate, supplement quantitative with qualitative methods (e.g., interviews with faculty or students or institutional case studies of policy or practice).

♦ weigh competing explanations of the macro trends in civic engagement, considering how they are related to political, demographic, or economic factors. Consider also the impact of changes in social and economic context (e.g., the lengthening transition to adulthood, the changing content of occupational skills).

♦ address self-selection problems to disentangle effects of college experience from maturation effects and broader changes in society.

focus on institutions and communities

♦ develop evidence about the impact of institutional leadership (which includes both the effects of individual leaders and the institutionalization of their vision).

♦ examine institutional culture as both a dependent and an independent variable to ascertain the effects that different campus cultures have, and how positive cultures and intentions can be encouraged.

♦ investigate interactions between communities and institutions of higher education in shaping student outcomes.

♦ study higher education as a venue for free public debate and the extent to which a college or university that promotes debate and student voice affects political discourse.

♦ investigate the integration of a broad range of co-curricular opportunities.

[1] William Talcott, "Modern Universities, Absent Citizenship? Historical Perspectives." CIRCLE Working Paper 39.

[2] Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens, *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

[3] Judith Torney-Purta and Jo-Ann Amadeo, "A Cross-National Analysis of Political and Civic Involvement among Adolescents", *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36, 269-74, 2003.

[4] Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What We Can Do About It* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

[5] Mark Hugo Lopez and Brent A. Elrod, "College Attendance and Civic Engagement Among 18-25 Year Olds," CIRCLE Fact Sheet (November 2005). Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: Vol. 2, A Third Decade of Research* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. 278: "With few exceptions … [mainly involving religious organizations and youth groups] the association between educational level and community service is positive, linear, and consistent."

[6] Stephen Earl Bennett and Linda L.M. Bennett, "Reassessing Higher Education's Effects on Young Americans' Civic Virtue" (revised paper originally delivered at the International Conference for Civic Education Research, Nov. 2003).

[7] Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi, *Generations and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1981), ch. 8 and Jennings, "Education and Political Development among Young Adults," *Politics and the Individual*, 3 (#2), 1-23. This is a longitudinal study of the high school class of 1965. Likewise, the IEA Study of 14-year-olds in 28 countries found large

differences in civic participation by *expected levels of education*. For example, U.S. students who see themselves as college-bound are three times as likely to expect to vote as those without post-secondary educational plans. See Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn Barber, and Britt Wilkenfeld, "Differences in the Civic Knowledge and Attitudes of U.S. Adolescents by Immigrant Status and Hispanic Background." *Prospects*. in press.

[8] Norman H. Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America* (Chicago, 1996).

[9] Pascarella and Terenzini, pp. 286, 294-5, citing numerous studies.

[10] Elizabeth Beaumont, Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, and Judith Torney-Purta, "Promoting Political Competence and Engagement in College Students: An Empirical Study,"Journal of Political Science Education, vol. 3 number 3, in press.

[11] Pascarella and Terenzini, p. 306.

[12] Lopez and Elrod. Since the data are cross-sectional, not longitudinal, they do not prove that individual males gain political voice.

[13] National Survey of Student Engagement, *2004 Annual Report*, p. 12.

[14] See, e.g., James Youniss, Jeffrey A. McLellan, and Miranda Yates, "What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 40, no. 5 (March/April 1997), pp. 620-631

[15] See, e.g., the American Diploma Project's benchmarks in English and mathematics, which include civic skills (via www.achieve.org <http://www.achieve.org>).

[16] Little available research has investigated this relationship at the college level, but there is some supportive research about younger students.

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